



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

What Hope Syria?

Citation for published version:

McWilliams, M, *What Hope Syria? Monica McWilliams Reports from the Turkish Border*, 2015, Web publication/site, Political Settlements Research Programme.
<<http://www.politicalsettlements.org/2015/09/06/monica-in-turkey/>>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



✉ PoliticalSettlements@ed.ac.uk (mailto:PoliticalSettlements@ed.ac.uk)

☎ +44 131 651 4566

f (<https://www.facebook.com/politicalsettlements>)

🐦 (<https://twitter.com/polsettlements>)

g+ (<https://plus.google.com/u/0/109795309149968998130/>)

📡 (<http://www.politicalsettlements.org/opinion/feed/>)



(<http://www.politicalsettlements.org>)

MENU

What hope Syria? Monica McWilliams reports from the Turkish border (<http://www.politicalsettlements.org/2015/09/06/monica-in-turkey/>)

6
Sep

Author : politicalsettlements **Category :** Conflict
 (<http://www.politicalsettlements.org/category/themes/conflict/>), Opinion (<http://www.politicalsettlements.org>)

(1) ([HTTP://WWW.POI](http://www.politicalsettlements.org/2015/09/06/monica-in-turkey/)

/2015/09

/06/MONICA-

IN-TURKEY/)

In a week in which a small drowned Syrian child – Aylan Kurdi – has awoken the conscience of Europe, PSRP team member Professor Monica McWilliams (<http://www.politicalsettlements.org/team/monicamcwilliams/>) (TJI) (<http://www.politicalsettlements.org/team/tji/>), reports from meetings with Syrians in Turkey.

What work were you doing and who did you meet with?

I was invited to return to southern Turkey by **Public International Law Group** (<http://publicinternationallawandpolicygroup.org/>), a global Pro Bono Law Firm based in Washington, DC. This law firm specialises in peace negotiations and post conflict constitutions. They have initiated a number of workshops on Inclusive Peacebuilding and Reconciliation in Syria and this was the third workshop which focused on 'Promoting Consensus Across Ethnic and Religious Divides'. The participants are all from inside Syria and were in a position to provide briefings on the current situation. I was invited to participate in the workshop on the theme of Civil Society Engagement on Peace Processes in Northern Ireland.

I also participated in a number of roundtable meetings in the evenings with civic society organisations – one with various women's organisations and one with the Centre for Civil Society and Democracy (<http://ccdsyria.org/>). I had been worked with this Centre during my four previous visits to Turkey. The photographs show the staff members who participated in the evening discussion. The participants from inside Syria were unable to take part in any workshop photographs due to security risks.

I also visited two women's centres where women and children are being accommodated. The women's husbands have been killed by the regime and in one case by ISIS. These women were so frightened about speaking out so their faces were covered during all of the interviews. Because of the way they are dressed, mostly in burqas, they did not want to give the impression that they were supporters of ISIS and were very outspoken about what ISIS and the regime were

doing. One group had produced a cup with two faces on each side – one showing Assad and one showing ISIS with the slogan “Same Shit” written underneath.

What are the difficulties of the situation?

The situation has got much worse since my visit last year. I was provided with a map which shows how Syria is now divided with four main groups (composed of many factions) in control of different areas. These are the Rebels (including the Free Syrian army and Jabhat al Nusra and the Syrian Revolutionary Front); the Loyalist (the Assad regime, the Syrian Resistance and Hezbollah); the kurds (YPG, Syriac union party and jab hat al-Akrad) and the foreign forces (Islamic State, ISIS).

The participants provided the following report from various areas inside Syria:

Summary of the current situation

Southern Syrian (Idlib)– the situation is different from place to place even within the same neighbourhood. The Provincial government and the local council no longer play any administrative role in the region. The Sharia court is doing most of the work because of the weakness of the local council. The court is executing decisions on relief works, culture, youth activities and education. The judicial system is not present – the Sharia court and judges who have defected from the regime are making the decisions.

In the liberated areas – the Islamic council are running the administration and no faction can make decisions unless they talk to the Islamic Commission first. The free police have very little local support since they have been arbitrarily arresting people and their ineffectiveness was reflected recently when 14 members of a local faction were able to disarm them. There is a complete breakdown in law and order and whatever is looted in the city is controlled by the factions.

Adlib is under the rule of Al Qaeda. In the Northern Countryside, the Provincial Council is ineffective and the security situation is getting worse with regular bombing. The Provincial Council does not have the legitimacy of the local councils – it is very weak and cannot dominate the local councils where the local factions are active. Al Nusra is the dominating faction but women are free to conduct some activities in areas under their control. The local council has given local women some support and allowed them to reopen a school.

Because of Al Qaeda's presence the local groups are having difficulty getting outside support for civic society activities.

A journalist from the northern Kurdish area who had been detained by the regime and is now living in Gaziantep reported on the situation in Kobani. People who have fled other areas have come to Kobani and Afrin and feel safer living in the Kurdish controlled areas. There are also people from other ethnicities living there now. He reported that people do not want a divided Syria. They have a concern that the country may end up divided according to ethnicity. The Kurdish women work in CSO's and some women are involved in politics with a number now involved in the national Kurdish Council.

Aleppo has achieved a lot of things despite the campaign of barrel bombs. Councils are still working. When fuel stopped the local people collected garbage on motorbikes to keep the city operating. A large number of refugees based in southern Turkey are from Aleppo but they can no longer go back across the border. The Turkish government closed the border three months ago as a result of bombs on the Turkish side. Some of those at the meeting had been smuggled into Turkey as they can no longer get permission to cross.

Tartous – controlled by Assad's regime. 90% of coastal areas are now controlled by armed gangs rather than the regime. Every one is taking control of their own areas with increasing numbers of armed groups. Nobody wants to leave their house because of the fear but since they are still paying loans on their property, they don't want to evacuate their homes. Huge rate of displacement – nobody wants to join the army. 20,000 local men were to be drafted but have gone into exile rather than be drafted. The garbage is no longer collected because of lack of funds. City full of mosquitoes because of the

lack of services. Electricity is no longer provided. The people who are now being left behind do not have the skills, or the capability, to run away. They have no option to leave since they can not get a passport and to obtain a passport they need thousands of dollars.

Damascus – some public institutions are still functioning but not providing services unless the area is under regime control. The people with the weapons are able to implement decisions – power over judges, schools etc Water and electricity fluctuates – three hours in some areas but if people live in an area dominated by the military, then they have greater access to services and longer rations. To rent a house, the person has to have security permission from the regime. The name of each person living in the house has to be registered and all visitors have to be registered. The checkpoints stop visitors and even relatives unless they agree to leave their ID cards at the checkpoints. They are then allowed a short visit of two hours and if they overstay, the army will drag visitors from the houses. One old woman stayed longer than two hours and the military came and took her out.

Depending on the surname the military will grant or deny permission for visits. In particularly difficult areas, men are evacuated – if there is a man in the house, they have to go to live in another area away from his family as to remain would place the family in jeopardy of constant searching. For those who have evacuated their homes, they have to seek permission from the regime to rent an apartment but most people don't have the money to rent. As a consequence huge crowds are now living in basements and shelters of schools. Many people are sharing the rent because of the expense which is causing overcrowding. There has been a 50% increase in the prices of medicine and people can no longer access antibiotics and other medicines for infections. In the centre of Damascus, the Iranian Embassy are now buying up the houses that have been evacuated and allocating the houses to Iranians who have begun to undertake reconstruction work for the regime.

Rural areas of **Damascus** are closed off as they are not regime or opposition. They cannot go in or out – they have local councils and Sharia courts, they live in complete isolation. Have to pay bribe money to get out and buy food and educational materials.

Jura and Khalifa (Central Syria) – the Islamic state have entered the district and now everything has changed. They have imposed a siege on 400,000 people. Prices have soared so people are now malnourished. Local civic society organisations are having to work in secret – with little support. Those in charge don't care about the cultural past of the city and proclaim to the local that 'you are with Isis or you have to leave'. The pluralism that once made up this city is now gone.

Do you seen any hope of a political solution to the conflict?

The participants were despairing of a political solution since the conflict is now going into its fifth year without any resolution in sight. The only change I can see is related to the discussions between Iran and the USA. If these discussions are on-going and include the future of Syria then there is some hope of some change at the international level. Given the geopolitics of the region and the veto at the UN Security Council, most people I spoke to were very disillusioned with both the USA and the European Union for their lack of intervention.

They reported that Assad continues to use chemical weapons and only stopped for a short period after Obama's threat. They believe that if President Obama has stated that Assad has no legitimacy then he should follow his words with action. They add that if Assad was opposed, then the Syrians would take care of ISIS themselves. They argue that more and more young men are joining jihadi groups because they are watching the barrel bombs descending on their families and feel powerless to defend themselves. As a result they take up arms with groups who they would never have dreamed of joining before the revolution.

How are women engaging?

The women continue to do amazing work despite all the obstacles they are facing. Those who are widowed are concerned about the future for their children and when I visited the women's centres, the women were grateful that their children were now receiving education which was not the case in Syria. Many women are still moving in and out of Syria. One group living in Zabadani are trying to reinstate a ceasefire that the women, involved in a Peace Circle, had succeeded in negotiating with the various armed factions now controlling that area. They presented me with a petition that 4,000 women had signed and are seeking international support for this petition which they have called 'Zabadai Women's Initiative: Stop the Violence'. The petition includes the stories of four women who have remained in Zabandi and then goes on to outline their eight demands.

This is just one example of the incredible work that women are doing on the ground. Others have reported the increase in sexual and domestic violence. The situation for women in detention is the worst with many human rights violations being reported. I also heard reports of women being subjected to acid attacks – one woman was attacked by her husband when she threatened to leave him because of his abusive behaviour. He was a member of the Sharia court and despite having thrown acid at her, he reported her to the regime as a rebel because she was working with an international NGO.

1 COMMENTS

What hope Syria? Monica McWilliams reports from the Turkish border (<http://rightsni.org/2015/09/what-hope-syria-monica-mcwilliams-reports-from-the-turkish-border/>)

Reply → (<http://www.politicalsettlements.org/2015/09/06/monica-in-turkey/?replytocom=21#respond>) 10 Sep 2015

[...] Institute, Ulster University. This post was originally posted on the Political Settlements blog at

<http://www.politicalsettlements.org/2015/09/06/what-hope-syria-monica-mcwilliams-reports/>

(<http://www.politicalsettlements.org/2015/09/06/what-hope-syria-monica-mcwilliams-reports/>) In a week in which a small drowned Syrian child – Aylan Kurdi – has awoken the conscience of [...]

+ *Add new comment*

Comment